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Why Russians want SALT II

Washington

Washington pretty generally agrees that Russia wants SALT; whether this makes it easier for the Senate to pass it is uncertain.

Why does Russia want SALT? Hawkish senators think this simply shows that the agreement is in Moscow's favor; it makes them all the more suspicious of the whole affair. Or the argument can be used another way: if Russia wants the agreement, doesn't that mean we can load it with reservations and amendments? President Carter says these would kill the treaty. But how does he know? The feeling is widespread, anyway, that Moscow hopes for Senate ratification.

I have a simpler explanation of why Moscow may want SALT, but it is so commonplace that I do not expect full support. It is just the thought that the Soviet Union may now be able to destroy the US industry maybe six times over, and that we can destroy them maybe 10 times. That would seem to many to be an adequate reason for working for a reduction of tension. But maybe SALT wouldn't reduce tension. Does Moscow have some craftier scheme? I suggest one motive. Richard J. Barnet, a student of the subject, writes in Foreign Affairs, spring, 1979:

"The Soviet Union, many observers believe, faces a series of fundamental domestic challenges: a sluggish economy, inefficient agriculture, the impending ascendancy of a non-Russian majority, the hazards of political succession, and the rise of a variety of dissident movements."

Mr. Barnet is saying that communism isn't efficient, it isn't working out very well. This may not be an adequate argument for wanting SALT but it might help understand Moscow's thinking as it watches the great debate in the US Senate.

Dr. Herbert Scoville Jr., former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, in charge of science and technology, says "one of the greatest myths" of the time is the theory that Russia "is ahead of the US in military technology." It is not so obvious to most people. Many note that Russia spends a higher ratio of its national product on arms than we do. Russia used to be far behind America's; now President Carter acknowledges that there is a situation of "rough equivalency."

The extraordinary arms load Russia is carrying must be hurting. Alan Wolfe, a visiting scholar at the Institution for the Study of Social Change, University of California, Berkeley, argues: "The Soviet Union is in the worst shape it has been in for years. Facing a paralyzing economic crisis, dependent on the US to provide bread to its own population, suddenly surrounded by antagonistic superpowers on all sides, the Russians are acting like any weak power. They are spending more on arms in order to gain the illusion that they are strong."

This is not wholly comforting, however, even if correct; many a war has been started by an anxious nation. History shows that peace can't survive indefinitely on the basis of fear alone.

Here is a comment from the London Economist (May 26) about Russia's declining oil; it says the trends are visible "and the engineering effort required to bring new production on stream fast enough to offset them may well be beyond the reach of the Soviet oil industry."

In judging Russia's view of itself now, these facts might be noted. In World War II Russia lost 20 million people.

With a labor force one-and-a-half times larger than America's its output is only half as big.

Its energy consumption is half America's. Its per capita personal consumption is one-third.

The predominant recent feature of the Soviet economy has been a slowdown in growth and this is still continuing.

Maybe Moscow would like a peace break.